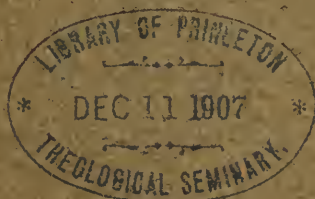


# THE HISTORICAL METHOD IN THE STUDY of RELIGION

By SHIRLEY JACKSON CASE, Ph.D.

An address delivered on the occasion  
of his inauguration into the professor-  
ship of the Philosophy and History  
of Religion in Cobb Divinity School,  
Bates College, Lewiston, Maine, June  
Twenty-Six, Nineteen Hundred Seven



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The Historical Method in the Study of Religion

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# The Historical Method in the Study of Religion

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It seems appropriate at this time that I should set forth the fundamental principles underlying my particular department: The Philosophy and History of Religion.

The scope of my work, the method to be pursued, and the results to be sought are all matters which seem to demand some exposition on this occasion. With this end in view I shall discuss the Historical Method in the Study of Religion, and thereby introduce you to the character of the work that falls distinctively to my hand as a teacher in Cobb Divinity School.

## RELIGION DEFINED

A glance at our latest catalog will show that my department proposes for itself no less a task than the study of the science of religion. It thereby regards religion as a science, and so must take it in a broad sense. Consequently a comprehensive definition of religion is essential to further enquiry, but this is not easily obtained. True, there are numerous definitions already in existence but most of them are inadequate—they are either not broad enough to include all varieties of faith, or not comprehensive enough to embrace all the elements in a single variety. If, for example, you say religion is the worship of Jehovah you have excluded some who are religious though they are neither Jews nor Christians; and if you call it the worship of any being or beings regarded by the individual as superhuman the definition is still unsatisfactory, for worship is not really religion but is merely one of its forms of expression. The individual worships because he is religious, and not *vice*

*versa*. Another popular statement defines religion as "the life of God in the soul of man," but this might lead one to infer that it is an exotic plant transferred from its native heavenly atmosphere into the frigid zone of the human soul. On the contrary, investigation seems to show that man is inherently and incurably religious. We propose to define religion as the God-ward consciousness of the human race, the soul's sense of its relation to deity. It is the God-faculty of man. This is comprehensive enough to include all peoples of every shade of faith. It embraces, indeed, the entire human race, for we have yet to find a people absolutely devoid of this consciousness. Some tribes, low in the scale of civilization, have been thought to be entirely without it, but a better acquaintance with them has shown that the supposition was erroneous. Sometimes this religious faculty is in a very crude state, resulting in a low conception of the deity and false ideas of the relation existing between him and the creature. But in Christ we see this religious consciousness in its highest activity; it is he who sees the Father with clearest vision, and the ideal relationship of man to God is set forth in his familiar words: "Thy will not mine be done." The noble Christian conception of God, and the Christian struggle to attain unity of will with the Father, seem a great distance removed from the faith of the savage, and the terror and superstition which control his attitude to the unseen, but in germ the intelligent attitude of the Christian and the blind groping of a primitive man are one—instinctively there is in each the God-ward leaning of the human spirit.

But religion is more than an inherent thought germ—it is a life. This God-ward consciousness has an objective content, an expressive vitality, and a character-determining power. Objectively it includes every picture of deity that has ever been painted by the imagination of man. It has

prompted him to see the Almighty sometimes in a freak of chance, sometimes in an unusual display of nature's powers, and sometimes in the still, small voice. Moreover, it will not remain unexpressed. Ceremony, creed, ritual, the diverse forms of worship from the superstitious practices of the savage to the sane devotion of the Christian find in it the main spring of their life. And it, of course, is the basal factor in determining personal conduct and character.

Religion, then, is not to be consigned to some hermetically sealed compartment of the human heart, it is an integral part of the man. It colors his thinking, regulates the devotions of his soul, and determines the balance of his entire life.

## THE STUDY OF RELIGION: ITS SCOPE

If religion must be thus broadly defined, what limits are to be set to the study of it? Such study will fall into three general divisions. First, an examination and comparison of the historical data of all religions, commonly designated the History and Comparison of Religions. This field of investigation is as wide as the distribution of the human family and reaches back to primeval man. Every element that is included in the religious life of all men, past and present, must be sought out, and the results of the investigation formulated. To these results the comparative method is then to be applied, that the fundamental conceptions of all religions may be ascertained, and the religious ideas of the race be thus reduced to their lowest terms. This comparison must deal with the relation of certain ideas in the same faith, or similar ideas in the faiths of different peoples. Take, for instance, the parallels that have been observed to exist between certain beliefs common to the Babylonians and Hebrews, or between Buddhism and Christianity. It is

the business of the student in this department to determine whether these similar ideas are proof of original interdependence, or whether the likeness is due to the working out of a common religious impulse. With his broad outlook it will not disturb him to find some phases of Christian thought anticipated in the historic faiths. Why should not human beings with a common religious instinct come to think alike, without borrowing from each other? Their resemblances in religious thinking may be but additional evidence of a common native impulse. This wide study of the historic religions is of especial importance for theological students. If they are to be the spiritual surgeons for their own generation they should understand the religious anatomy of the race.

This then is the first item in our study, the sifting and comparing of the objective elements in the religions of the world.

There is also a second important item: A study of the religious consciousness in the life of the individual. What are the laws which govern this God-ward gravity of the human mind? What are the conditions which stimulate its activity, or what the circumstances which retard its growth? This is a study of the personal element sometimes called the Psychology of Religion. Here, too, the ministerial student will find material for reflection. Possibly we make some of our gravest blunders by assuming that the mind of another must deal with religious problems just as ours did. Nothing could serve better as a corrective for this error than a study of the personal element in the religious experience of the past. To illustrate, suppose you wish to explain the nature of true conversion, what is the mental process that you would require in the individual? Would it be somewhat in this wise: an overmastering sense of the burden of sin, a feeling of absolute helplessness under this burden, and

then a sudden feeling that the burden has been removed by believing in the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ? But the mental make-up of some men is such that they do not seem able to entertain this point of view. They are not conscious of being great sinners, for their lives have not been stained by vicious habits; and the moral law has been kept as carefully by them as by yourself. Moreover, they do not feel that they are helplessly worsted in the struggle with sin, for they are aware of a certain moral fibre within them which strengthens them to resist evil. Nor can their sense of justice (so they say) consent to the validity of punishing the innocent instead of the guilty. And yet they seem to be honest and sincere, and are interested in things religious. What shall we do with such men? Shall we demand that their thought be cast into our mental mold, or else that they forever remain outside the pale of the church? If we are sure that our interpretation of the psychology of conversion is absolutely infallible then we must demand that it be accepted as the only condition of entrance into the kingdom. But before we become dogmatic upon such matters, we should make a careful study of those elements which, at this point, entered into the experience of well-known persons in the past. Can we verify our theory by reference to the initiatory experiences of James, John, Peter, Matthew, Nathaniel, Justin Martyr? Is the vital thing in conversion the attainment by all individuals of a uniform psychological state, or is it the conscious fusion of the spirit of a man with the spirit of God under a psychological state that may be peculiar to each individual? At any rate the most valid information on this question, as well as on many others, will be found in a study of personal experience in its historic manifestations.

And another very profitable side to this psychological enquiry is the insight which it gives into the mental activi-

ties of great religious leaders. What is more enlightening and personally helpful than to follow their mental processes as they struggle with the problems of their day! So to study the thought of Christ is to get for oneself the mind of the Master, and the ability to think his thoughts after him.

But our task is not yet complete. We have dealt with the data of religion drawn from history and psychology, and our next undertaking is to discover if possible a common, fundamental religious instinct in man, to formulate the laws which govern it, and to test the validity of these laws in the light of common rationality, and in relation to the great world order. This is technically denominated the Philosophy of Religion. It used to be supposed that one could philosophize upon this subject without much regard for objective facts, it was the duty of the facts to accommodate themselves to the theories which an elaborate system of philosophy had enunciated. But this method is fast becoming obsolete. Not long ago a late authority, speaking upon this topic, said: "The time has long since passed when people fancied they could philosophize about religion without caring for its history. Of the absolute indispensability of historical studies I need not remind you."

Such in general is the scope of my department. It deals primarily with the religious consciousness of humanity as expressed in history. It seeks, therefore, to investigate all facts in the realm of the religious life, and to enquire into the mental activities of religious personages, and finally to show that its formulations satisfy the intellectual curiosity of the race, and accord with a rational interpretation of the universe.

### THE HISTORICAL METHOD DEFINED

Thus it is evident that we are committed to the so-called historical method in the entire study, and it is now our inten-

tion to view this method at closer range. We shall seek to define it more exactly, to show its bearing upon some of the more important points in Christianity, and to set forth the ends which it should serve.

History deals primarily with facts. It may content itself with a simple narration of past events, or it may comment upon their relations and explain the causes which produced them, but essentially it is a factual science. As applied to religion (and we shall now speak of it in connection with Christianity more especially) it is a method of study which scans the past to ascertain matters of certainty—exactly what was thought, said, or done. Now is it true, as one said not long ago, that “there are well-meaning Christians all over the world whose eyes are unable to stand the full glare of facts?” Are the devotees of Christianity more loyal to tradition, to prejudice, to dogma, or to creed than they are to truth? I cannot think it is so. Indeed, we are sometimes dogmatic, and show scant courtesy toward him whose opinions differ from ours, but we each think we are standing upon the facts, though it is evident that someone must be mistaken. The historical method seeks to set aside all blinding prejudices and to look with steady eye upon the religious truth of the ages. If there is anything discovered that calls for remodeling of ideas it stands ready to follow the light—it loves light rather than darkness even though to walk in the light requires the sacrifice of some of its long-cherished opinions.

Is it, then, the champion of every would-be new theology? Our ears are sometimes assaulted by a babel of voices that would have us think Christianity has never been properly understood until now, but to the student who pursues the historical method these new nostrums are not particularly palatable. If they relate themselves properly to the age-long stream of truth he accepts them, otherwise he rejects.

His is the scientific attitude. He thinks it shows an inordinate conceit on the part of the theologian to assume that he knows all the truth that is knowable, and that it is equally a sign of empty-headedness to be chasing balloon-fashion every new fad that appears on the theological horizon. Historical study is a sober science. It calls to its aid the critical historian, the trained archaeologist, and the competent student of literature. Of the first it asks accurate information about the happenings of the past; it demands of the second all available knowledge regarding the life and customs of primitive peoples, as a key to the comprehension of their religious ideas; and to the third it looks for reliable information concerning the origin and trustworthiness of the extant religious literatures. Incidentally, too, it seeks the aid of the psychologist and philosopher in interpreting the mind and thought of individuals. Nor is it concerned with the past alone. If that were the case it might be content with establishing a museum of antiquities, a collection of theological curios; but it labors in the interests of the present, hence it aims to put its results in such form that the present may reap full benefit therefrom.

Perhaps we shall understand this historical method better by observing its manner of procedure in some specific instances. We shall take three illustrations: How does it deal with the Bible? How does it study the historical person, Jesus Christ? and how does it handle the problem of authority in religion?

### THE HISTORICAL METHOD APPLIED TO THE BIBLE

When one approaches the Bible from this point of view he is apt to be dubbed "higher critic," and that is an opprobrious epithet often thought to be almost coterminous with infidel. Now the student may be a higher critic and he

may not be. Very likely he is, however, but what of that? You know there are critics and critics. Luther said of some interpreters, who were even among his own followers, that they reminded him of Solomon's trading ships: some came back ladened with gold, others brought only apes and peacocks. If one is a historical investigator he finds no delight in exploiting freakish hypotheses, but he will conduct a rigid research for the truth. Occasionally some one snaps up a fact that has been brought to light by the archaeologist and flaunts it in the face of the public as evidence that refutes the folly of the higher critic. Some of our otherwise reputable religious journals are not entirely free from this sort of jingoism. Do they not know that it is the higher critic, if his method is genuinely historical, as is usually the case, who is most ardently backing this work of research! When the result corroborates the scriptural records his joy is great, and when it is contradictory he loyally sets to work to deal with the situation. It is the avowed purpose of the historical student to shed all possible light upon the book.

And how does he go about it? One of the first queries he raises is, How did the sacred book come into being? He traces the history of its translation back to the ancient manuscripts, but here he is dismayed to find what at first sight seems to be utter chaos. He may discover 100,000 variations of reading in the New Testament manuscripts alone. He must then sift and compare and select these readings that seem to be best authenticated; but here he must trust his own judgment at many points, for he will not find the original copy written by Matthew or by Mark or by John, nor will he at best get within a couple centuries of the autograph. He cannot know what alterations in copying may have taken place during that time; but thanks to his tireless industry and the saneness of his judgment he has convinced us that our present revised version represents in

all essentials the truth as it was recorded by the authors themselves. The process, however, has destroyed any belief which he may have held in a doctrine of verbal inspiration, but it has given him instead a more faithful representation of the meaning of the original documents.

He will now push his enquiry still further to ascertain the facts about individual books: When and why were they written, and by whom? And have they undergone any literary history in the course of transmission? What were the grounds on which certain books were chosen as authoritative, and how and when did this idea come into being?

And then he turns his attention to the *interpretation* of scripture, and finds that certain verses have here and there been torn from their context in order to support some favorite theological doctrine; and he forthwith records an emphatic veto. He demands that every interpreter understand the circumstances behind the individual book, and interpret its meaning accordingly. Especially does he object to having *a priori* hypotheses in theology foisted upon Paul, or Peter, or Jesus. He demands that you interpret these persons, and all others, in the light of their times and in accordance with the context, whether you can square the interpretation with your own belief or not. The historical student has great respect for the Bible but he does not treat it as a fetish. He worships and adores the God whose truth it reveals, and recognizes that the sacred word is not the author of religion but rather is one of its products. His aim is, therefore, to understand the book that he may ultimately comprehend the truth which brought it into being.

### JESUS STUDIED HISTORICALLY

How does the historical investigator proceed in his study of Jesus Christ? One of his first efforts will be to eliminate if possible those elements in the reported words and deeds

of the Master that are colored by the individualism of the different gospel writers. And here he is greatly aided by the fact that there are four biographies instead of one. A careful comparison may betray individual traits which could never be known from one alone, and an original incident or word that failed to appeal to one may have been preserved by another. This effort, if successful, would show the real Jesus of history as distinct from that special picture of him painted respectively by Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John.

There will also be a very earnest attempt to understand the mind of Jesus, to trace the history of his religious development as he met the great issues of his day, to appreciate his view of the truth, to learn the secret of his power, and to understand the full significance of his wonderful message to mankind.

Then there is the person of Jesus, with the doctrinal interpretation of which the historical student is not much inclined to meddle. He does however recognize Jesus' uniqueness, and he strives to investigate the facts which reveal its basis. In so far as this demands an examination of personality, or a discussion of metaphysical problems, this method holds that the data of modern research in the departments of psychology and philosophy shall be consulted. The stereotyped phrases of some of the ancient theologians, whose logic was sometimes verbal rather than rational, must often be ruled out of court, for we recognize that psychology and metaphysics belong to an exact science whose domain must not be desecrated by word-juggling devices regarding like natures, or identical natures, or unity of nature and distinction of personality, and the like. Historical study has no difficulty whatever in recognizing the divinity of Christ, but it sees his divinity more easily in the realm of the spirit than in the physical or metaphysical spheres.

## HISTORY AND AUTHORITY

In the next place, how are we to deal with the problem of authority in religion? It is the dictum of historical science that truth alone is authoritative, and that written records have authority just in proportion to their truthfulness. By this canon it measures all documents, even the Bible. It regards the truth recorded in the Bible as finding its validity, not primarily in the fact of scriptural canonicity, but in its own essential qualities. In other words, a thing is not true because it is in the Bible, but it is in the Bible because it is true, or was thought to be true at the time the narrative was written. This, on the strength of the best evidence available, seems to have been the opinion of Jesus who regarded some things in the book, said by those of old time in the religious childhood of the Hebrew race, not as absolute and eternal verities when placed under the searchlight of his superior wisdom. Truth carries with it its own attestation, and does not rest upon some arbitrary dictum pronounced in the past. For example, what constitutes the binding power of the decalogue? Is it this, that God has decreed it to be a law binding upon mankind for all ages? Would it, therefore, be right to steal if God had not commanded otherwise? Of course not. There is really no such thing as creating law, law is discovered not made. Even physical law which appears regnant in the universe is not to be thought of as a separate thing due to a special creative act, but inheres essentially in the very idea of a created universe. So the decalogue is inherently authoritative, and is not merely made so by the divine pronouncement. Had God pronounced to the contrary, thus violating moral truth, he would not have been God. Truth has rights upon which even the Almighty may not infringe. In the very nature of things it would be impossible for him to decree that error should be truth.

But what capacity has man for comprehending truth? There is, in the first place, the common religious faculty of the race. This has uniformly borne witness to such articles of faith as confidence in the existence of deity, an idea of the relationship of the human and the divine, and some sense of a future condition; and its witness is not without weight. But of more worth are the clearer visions of Christians in past ages, to whom the great essentials of Jesus' revelation have proven soul-satisfying. We are bound to respect the Christianity of the past, and regard it an authoritative factor in molding that of the present.

Then there is the authority of the individual. He comes into conscious relation with God and, in so far as his spirit receives the enlightening of the divine spirit, he considers himself to be in the possession of truth. But what shall we say of the extent and absoluteness of this test? We know how tenaciously some men hold quite contrary opinions, each equally confident that the other is in error. Calvin declared Christ to be "the eternal son of God" while Servetus believed him to be the "son of the eternal God," and Servetus burned at the stake in loyalty to his faith while Calvin thought God's will was thereby being performed. The personal equation can never be entirely eliminated from our thinking, but its presence may be recognized. But suppose we say, "we are indoctrinated by the Holy Spirit and therefore are right; we have the truth and those who do not agree with us are in error." When we take this attitude very likely we need to be reminded that there are some things which, in the very nature of the case, God himself cannot do. For instance, he cannot put the entire ocean into a teacup and have it remain the ocean, nor can he instil a full revelation of truth into a cranium whose thought capacity is of narrow range and whose chambers are already occupied by the demons of dogmatism, ignorance, prejudice and religious

intolerance. Perhaps the religious mind more than any other needs to give constant attention to mental housecleaning. But at best the limitations of a man forbid that God should make an absolute and supreme revelation of truth to him. It is not enough to say "this is the way it seems to me and this must be the final test of religious certainty." Yet there is danger of our doing this without having made an honest effort to free ourselves from enslaving limitations.

Thus historical study appeals for its authority to the self-attesting power of truth, to the interpretations of the individual and of the race, and to the scriptural records, particularly those which contain the message of Jesus.

### THE STUDY OF RELIGION: ITS COMPREHENSIVE AIM

Finally, what are the ends which this entire study is meant to subserve in the training of men for the Christian ministry? Time will permit us to answer the question only in merest outline. *Its comprehensive aim is to grasp the meaning of human existence in its relation to the life of God.* What is the significance of a human life in its relation to the age-long story of the divine economy?

But at once we are impressed by the insignificance of a human being. How insignificant is man *physically*! His life hangs by a delicate thread that may snap in an instant, nor can he compare in strength with the beast of the field or the creature of the forest. The ox that he goads or the lion that he cages may easily worst him in a trial of physical strength.

And how small man is in the vastness of the universe! Some starry night he wanders forth, in imagination, into space. When he has reached the most distant planet his journey is scarcely begun, yet he has passed many twinkling orbs that far exceed in bulk his little mother earth; and then

he passes on to the nearest fixed star, only to find it the center of a solar system as vast as his own. And beyond is a labyrinth of worlds. Blinded by the blaze of immensity he gropes his way back to earth and asks, What is man in the vast universe of God? He is, as it were, only a mote on a little grain of star dust whirling on endlessly through space.

Or look at him, if you will, as he fills his place upon the earth. He may boast of his divine origin, or exult in the promise of his glorious future; he may observe that the Bible opens with a Paradise made for him and closes with the picture of a grander Paradise that awaits him, but what lies between these two mountain peaks of revelation? When the gates of the first Eden closed upon mankind, he descended headlong to the valley below and here he has been left to work out his destiny. He is henceforth a creature of the lowland, and must breathe the odors of its miasmatic swamps that exhale the pestilential malaria of sin. Here, too, lurks the evil serpent, which, grown bold with his success over men, finally attempts to fasten his fangs in the very Son of God. The story of human earthly struggle from the beginning to the end is one of sore conflict and distress. Surely there can be little wonder that the human spirit at last should flutter at the windows of heaven as a bird with sin-stained and bedraggled plumage.

Man, standing alone, is nothing. He may flourish to-day and to-morrow and the day after, but ultimately is cut down as grass and withereth. He finds the true significance of his being only *by linking himself with the Almighty*.

The history of human progress has emphasized this fact time and again. How does it happen that to-day the gigantic steam engine plunges headlong across the continent and the giant steamship cleaves its way through the ocean, effecting a speed in transportation of which our ancestors of a few generations ago never dreamed? Has the Creator

endowed the universe with some new possibilities within these recent years? No! From the very day of creation the little drop of water held its expansive properties, but for ages it had been waiting for some man to unlock the portals of its power. To-day the electric wire encircles the globe and we may send a message, in almost an instant, to some far distant friend, or indeed converse with him. Has God only recently surcharged the universe with electric power? No! From time immemorial the lightning has sported in the heavens, waiting for some man, with Promethean cunning, to lay hold of it and harness it.

This divine intention is further emphasized by the mental and spiritual endowments bestowed upon humanity. When an individual boasts that he is self-made, he can properly mean only that he has made good use of the possibilities with which God has endowed him, and the man whose powers of spiritual perception are so keen that he becomes a remarkable interpreter of the divine, will acknowledge humbly that the secret of his ability is the leading presence of the divine spirit. At best the rational and spiritual man is merely thinking God's thoughts after him; yet it is the *man* who thinks, and this power to think and to worship has been his ever since the instant that he became a man. If he fails to realize these possibilities he not only thwarts the divine intention but impoverishes the universe of which he is a part. Yet how patiently God has waited for a Copernicus to dethrone the earth and enthrone the sun in the interpretation of the solar system; for a Kepler and a Galileo to spy out its secrets and a Newton to read its laws; for an Isaiah or a Paul to comprehend its spiritual meaning! Here was the world waiting to be understood and God desiring to be comprehended, and here were men possessed with the very faculties necessary for the task if only they would use them. Man is a sluggard; he has been lamentably tardy in

entering into the heritage that would give his life its fullest meaning.

To bring men to the consciousness of this mission is the supreme aim of our study. We do not seek merely to recover the exact situation which produced an Isaiah, a Paul or a Jesus, or called into being the sacred literature of Christendom; but we strive to measure, to fathom, the spiritual currents, which bore these upon their bosom. That great "unplumbed, estranging sea" whose billows break on the shores of time, but whose yonder edge placidly laps eternity's strand, casts upon our coasts the flotsam and jetsam of the ages; and as we gather therefrom many a gem of truth, we strive to comprehend the eternal, divine significance of human existence.

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